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Continued development, maintenance and enrichment of the United Nations web site in the six official languages

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is the fifth in the series addressing the multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of the United Nations web site. It is presented to the Committee on Information for its guidance on the policy decisions required for timely implementation.

Two courses of action are presented for consideration and necessary action:

Action 1: *Replicate all materials on the English web site in the other language sites*;

Action 2: *Allow the web sites to develop independently in each language on the basis of the resource capacities of author Departments and Offices*.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 56/64 B of 24 December 2001, the General Assembly noted that "there is a need for the Secretary-General to continue to develop proposals for the multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of the United Nations web site in order to ultimately lead to achieving full parity among the official languages of the United Nations" and requested him "to report thereon to the Committee on Information at its twenty-fourth session".

2. In addition, in the last report (A/AC.198/2001/8) to the Committee on Information on the subject, it was reiterated that the realization of full parity among the official languages would require additional resources and that the implementation of policy decisions regarding content creation would also necessitate the allocation of resources.

II. Background

3. The continued development and enhancement of the United Nations web site in all the official languages of the Organization has been one of the major issues of concern for the Committee on Information, from its twenty-first session to its twenty-third session. This issue has been addressed and proposals presented in four reports of the Secretary-General. The Committee on Information considered the first report on this issue (A/AC.198/1999/6) during the first part of its twenty-first session, in May 1999. The follow-up report requested by the Committee (A/AC.198/1999/9 and Corr.1 and 2) was considered at its resumed twenty-first session, in November 1999. A third report (A/AC.198/2000/7-A/AC.172/2000/4) was requested by the Committee on Conferences and was considered by that Committee as well as the Committee on Information at its twenty-second session. The fourth report (A/AC.198/2001/8) provided an update on the development of the United Nations web site, as well as upcoming development plans for the site. The present report presents an analysis of the prevailing situation and outlines a number of possible courses of action.

III. Update on the United Nations web site

4. The United Nations web site (www.un.org) was formally launched in September 1995 and has undergone many changes and refinements since then. In September 2000, a redesigned web site was launched in the six official languages. New pages covering specific issues have been regularly added to the site. Examples include those relating to terrorism, Afghanistan, the award of the Nobel Prize for Peace to the Organization and the Secretary-General, and conferences and special sessions of the General Assembly. It is widely accepted that the Department of Public Information has created a high-quality, user-friendly and cost-effective web site. This is especially noteworthy, considering the scope of this undertaking, the budget constraints within the United Nations and the remarkably rapid expansion of the World Wide Web. The web site has been acclaimed as a very useful tool and is receiving millions of accesses on a daily basis.

5. Webcasts of important meetings and events have now become a regular and popular feature, with the Department embarking on a pilot project to provide

webcasts internally within existing resources. In the last six months, the Information Technology Section of the Department of Public Information has provided over 292 hours of live webcasts, which have been archived for on-demand playback by users. In addition, over one hour of webcasts of the daily news by United Nations Radio in all six official languages plus Portuguese provide visitors with the latest news on the United Nations.

6. The United Nations News Centre has been further enhanced through conversion to a database platform and a major redesign aimed at improving its navigability and visual attractiveness. The redesigned site provides significantly upgraded access to all relevant material and more powerful search tools. Its new database-driven functions and more user-friendly structure offers one-click access to news stories organized by thematic and regional categories, as well as to automatically retrieved "related materials", including recent news articles and texts of press releases and briefings. The site also features enhanced "News Focus" pages, created in rapid reaction to major United Nations-related news developments to offer a wide variety of useful links to, inter alia, key resolutions, reports, statements, relevant United Nations offices and agencies.

7. The United Nations CyberSchoolBus, the web site for young people and educators, currently contains over 3,500 pages on the English-language site and approximately 800 pages in French, of which 400 pages were translated into French in 2001. The Spanish language site includes about 300 pages. An additional 300 pages will be translated into Spanish by the end of 2002. Currently, there is only a small amount of material available on the CyberSchoolBus site in Russian. Close to 400 pages which were translated in 2001 are currently being integrated into page templates and should be available in several months time. The number of pages available in Arabic and Chinese is very low. Since the project is financed completely through very limited extrabudgetary resources, development in this respect may not match the pace of that of the rest of the United Nations web site.

8. The United Nations web site currently receives, on average, over 5 million accesses daily from more than 165 countries. With almost 600,000 pages viewed daily in 2001, the web site has achieved yet another milestone, having recorded a total of 1.12 billion accesses for the year 2001, up from 11 million in 1996 and 488 million in 2000 (see table).

Table
Access to the United Nations web site

Year	*Total number of accesses*
1996	11 547 325
1997	42 777 271
1998	97 049 852
1999	182 046 126
2000	488 364 528
2001	1 120 265 550

9. The usage of the web sites in languages other than English has continued to increase slowly, but steadily. Users have been accessing the United Nations web site and, while looking for information in the various official languages, are usually redirected to the English site. The reason is most likely that the material being sought has not been translated into the desired language. Once users have experienced this problem, they tend to use the English site directly, knowing that there they will find the most extensive content. Annex I provides a snapshot view of the comparative usage of the language sites. After English, the level of usage is highest in the Spanish and French languages, followed by almost equal levels of access for the Arabic, Chinese and Russian languages.

10. As the United Nations web site has developed, there have been challenges along the way, as there are at present. Not only must the current quality of the web site be maintained, but it must also be taken to the next level, overcoming the challenges that may be encountered in the process.

11. In this respect, it could be argued that the levels of usage of the language sites other than English are not high for lack of sufficient content, or owing to the fact that the translations of information that users are looking for have not been made available. It is therefore necessary to create language units in order to effectively coordinate, maintain and develop contributed content and translations received through traditional and non-traditional methods and with the cooperation of other United Nations offices, for example, the United Nations information centres.

IV. Development and enhancement considerations

12. The United Nations web site bears the added burden that the world looks to the United Nations and expects its web site to be complete, uniform and well maintained — perhaps more than any other web site in the world. The difficulty in achieving parity among the official languages has been a major consideration and concern for Member States. The question how to reach communities with limited technical infrastructure presents both a responsibility and a challenge to the Department of Public Information.

13. It was considered in a previous report of the Secretary-General that a "critical point has been reached, requiring a careful analysis of all relevant issues with a view to taking a decision on the appropriate allocation of resources for further development of the new medium" (see A/AC.198/1999/6, para. 9). Indeed, exploring the full usage of the Internet can only be realized through the development of the technical makeup and infrastructure that are indispensable for supporting "the increased bandwidth and traffic requirements of multimedia contents, as well as the larger volume of traditional contents in all six official languages". It should be reiterated that "in the context of consideration of the multilingual development (linguistic parity), maintenance and enrichment of United Nations web sites, the first task would be to rationalize the structure of the sites, requiring a feasibility study on the complete redesign and restructuring of the sites in order to render them more user-friendly and flexible. Such a study should be conducted through the use of outside industry experts" (see A/AC.198/2000/7, para. 4). Since resources have not been identified for this purpose, the study has not yet been conducted.

14. Over the last few years, the Internet has achieved increasing importance and high visibility. The General Assembly and the Committee on Information have

recognized this, as well as the fact that parity among the six official languages on the web sites is an important consideration. In its resolution 53/208 C of 18 December 1998, the General Assembly stressed "the need for the continuous development, maintenance and enrichment of the United Nations web sites, with a view to achieving equal treatment of the six official languages on those web sites".

15. In its resolution 55/136 B, the General Assembly encouraged the Secretary-General to "continue his efforts to develop and enhance the United Nations web sites in all the official languages of the Organization" and requested the Secretary-General "to continue to develop proposals for consideration". In spite of the efforts made, multilingual development and enrichment of the site has been slower than expected, primarily owing to a lack of resources.

16. The United Nations web site, as unique as the Organization it represents, faces special challenges in achieving parity among the official languages. The closest in scope and expanse to the United Nations web site is perhaps the web site of the European Union, which is presented in 11 languages. Not all material is available in all of the languages, and the level of content varies significantly among those languages.

17. Creative options to translate material and web site creation are already being explored. The Department of Public Information has entered into agreements with two universities in Spain, which have agreed to provide translations into Spanish of portions of the United Nations web site, at no cost to the Organization. More than 30 documents have been translated in this manner and are of excellent quality. It is hoped that similar arrangements can be extended to other universities for possible assistance in the other official languages. The Secretary-General appeals to Member States to propose similar offers of support in this regard.

18. In addition, one relatively rapid way of adding a large number of documents to the web site in all official languages would be to make available the contents of the Official Document System, which already exists and is regularly maintained in all official languages, for free access through the United Nations web site, as indicated in document A/C.5/56/12.

19. Machine-assisted translation is another option which may be considered in the future. There is commercial software currently available that can translate basic text without human intervention, but the results are not generally of publishable quality. Tests have revealed that those translations do not yet work well with the type of documents most prevalent on the United Nations web site. If incorrect information or inaccurate translations were to be posted on the official United Nations web site owing to a translation error by the software, it could cause major embarrassment to the Organization. As such, any large-scale machine-assisted translation exercise would also need to be backed up by a team of editors for each language. However, it will be considered an option as and when the quality of the software for translation improves.

20. The Working Group on Internet Matters established by the Publications Board (see Administrative instruction ST/AI/2001/5), is already in operation and has established task teams to enhance the guidelines on United Nations Internet publishing, to include the issue of the availability of information materials on the United Nations web site in all official languages. It will review the existing

guidelines and propose additions and/or amendments to ensure coherence of information, avoid duplication and rationalize management of the web site.

V. Questions of parity among the official languages on the United Nations web site

21. In paragraph 2 of Part V of General Assembly resolution 56/242, the Assembly expresses concern over the content of paragraph 7 in A/AC.198/2001/8, which states:

> "While multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of the United Nations web site has been at the forefront of the Internet activities of the Department of Public Information, progress has been slower than expected due to a lack of in-house expertise and resources in the non-working languages of the Secretariat. Furthermore, as indicated in an earlier report (A/AC.198/2000/7), it is also vital that the issue of public information content creation be separated from the issue of ongoing maintenance, coordination and management. Until those two issues — content creation and ongoing maintenance, coordination and management — are dealt with, the realization of a truly equal multilingual web site will remain elusive."

22. It is necessary to consider the entire paragraph in the following context. The Department of Public Information has reiterated that the two issues referred to in paragraph 7 of A/AC.198/2001/8 quoted above, i.e. that of content creation in all official languages and the ongoing maintenance, coordination and management of the web site, remain central to the achievement of parity among the official languages on the United Nations web site.

23. There are three basic categories of information and data that are placed on the site:

(a) Static elements that do not change and do not need regular maintenance;

(b) Materials that need updating daily, such as news items, briefings, press releases and the United Nations Journal;

(c) Databases that are continuously updated.

24. Some elements of the web site could be made available in all languages, particularly static elements (item (a) above). This would include the home page, most of the first-layer pages listed (and linked) from the home page and documents once they are posted. Added to this would be basic information about the Organization and its wide range of activities. Some elements are indeed currently available in all of the official languages.

25. As far as the other categories of material are concerned, prior to the advent of the Web, they were neither produced nor budgeted for production in six official languages. This is especially true of databases. It would appear that the United Nations web site, by aggregating all this content, has only served to highlight a situation that has existed for most of the life of the Organization.

26. It is pertinent to point out that, judging from the vast amount of e-mail queries and comments received by the various parts of the web site, it appears that user-demand for material in languages other than English is not high. That, of course,

may be due to the fact that connectivity in regions using those languages is an issue, as may be the widespread accessibility of computers in others. However, to resolve this issue, there are several possible approaches.

27. On the basis of its communications objectives, the United Nations seeks to ensure that all necessary and useful information is disseminated worldwide. There will always be the occasional exception, but all reasonable efforts will be made to ensure that the most necessary and useful information is disseminated to the largest number of people.

28. An important issue which needs to be addressed concerns those information documents and materials (such as press releases for example) which were never mandated for translation or production in all official languages. It follows therefore, that no mandate and thus no resources exist to produce them in all official languages solely for the web site.

VI. Possible courses of action

29. Having studied the requests from Member States and weighed different options for achieving various levels of parity among the official languages on the United Nations web site, two possible courses of action are presented for consideration by Member States. These are by no means exhaustive.

30. Another possible approach towards achieving parity among the official languages on the United Nations web site was also considered. This would make available on the web site only those materials that are available in all six languages. No material would be translated specifically for the web site. As such, only those materials that have already been identified and budgeted for translation would be processed and made available on the web site.

31. While this may appear to be the most cost-effective way of ensuring total parity among the languages on the web site, there are two major disadvantages to this course of action: it would require the removal of considerable amounts of material from the English and French sites that are not available on the other official language sites; it would also severely curtail the amount of material made available in English and French, thereby significantly reducing the overall value and utility of the web site. **This course of action is therefore not recommended by the Secretary-General.**

32. No cost estimates are provided because it is felt that guidance is required from Member States on the principles of parity before proceeding to a detailed costing exercise. It is reiterated that detailed cost estimates can be arrived at following an industry-standard feasibility study, as requested in A/AC.198/2000/7, which would ascertain the requirements with respect to staffing, technology and content management for the development of the United Nations web site in all official languages. Under either of the possible courses of action, the establishment of a sound basis for regular content-generation and maintenance, two basic criteria for any successful web site, remain of paramount importance. Therefore, in order to ensure adequate management of the much enhanced content in all official languages, the proposal presented in document A/AC.198/2000/7, annex I, continues to represent the minimum resource requirements. As such, approval of either course of

action would presuppose the approval of those resources. That annex has been updated and appended to the present report as annex II.

Action 1
Replicate all materials on the English web site onto the other sites

33. This action would involve translation of all materials and databases by the respective content-providing offices into all official languages. Each content-providing office will therefore need to determine the level of resources associated with the translation and processing for the web site. The Department of Public Information will continue to provide coordination, management and guidance for the entire site in all official languages. As indicated in earlier reports, this course of action would entail extremely high costs, should Member States decide that all current materials should also be translated.

34. One possible option under this course of action would be to designate a future date by which all supporting arrangements would be in place and continue with parity from that date onwards. It would be understood, and noted on the respective web sites, that only new materials would be available in all official languages.

35. Another option would be to exempt specific items from translation (for example, the *United Nations Treaty Series*, which occupies over 700,000 pages on the English web site.)

Action 2
Allow the web sites to develop independently in each language, on the basis of the resource capacities of author Departments and Offices

36. This appears to be the most prudent and cost-effective course of action, in that material would continue to be added on an incremental basis in each of the official languages. All materials that are currently produced, in whatever combination of languages, will be processed and made available on the web site. This could be accomplished by content-providing offices, including the Department of Public Information, by adjusting the publication of information materials in order to assure a steady supply of materials in each of the official languages. Content-providing offices would determine the amount of information to be made available in each of the languages based on their respective resource capacities for this purpose.

37. However, in this regard, it should be noted that most content-providing offices have not been able to create their respective web sites in the non-working languages of the Secretariat.

VII. Conclusions and recommendations

38. Over the last five years, the Department of Public Information has gained considerable experience and expertise in developing, managing and enhancing the

United Nations web site in all official languages, as well as 17 non-official languages.

39. It would be costly, time-consuming and duplicative for every content-providing office to seek to develop the same capacity and expertise in a meaningful way. At the same time, the Department of Public Information has neither the mandate nor the resources to render the entire United Nations web site into all official languages.

40. Should Member States decide to approve action 1 as outlined above, it should be noted that there will be significant costs to content-providing offices as well as for development of enhanced management capacity within the Department of Public Information.

41. **It is therefore recommended that Member States approve action 2 as outlined above, with the full understanding that, given the level of resources for translation available in the author departments, full parity among official languages on the United Nations web site will not be achieved for some time to come.**

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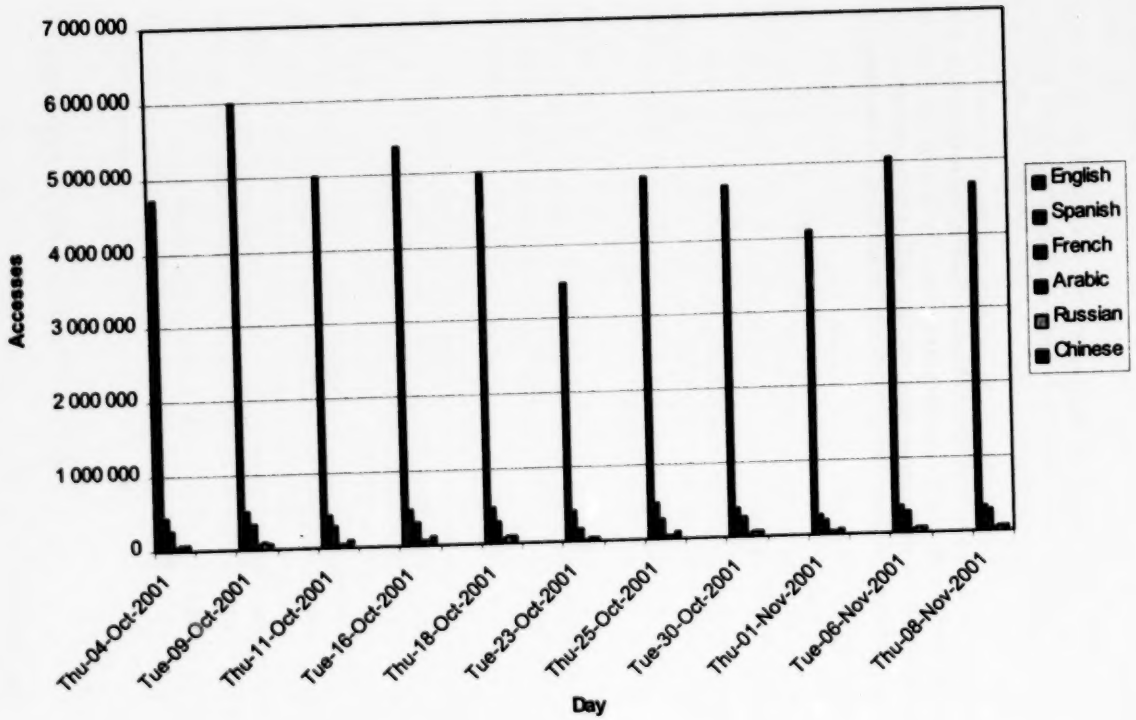
Annex I

Access statistics comparison by language



Annex II

Resource requirements of the Department of Public Information for the ongoing development and maintenance of the United Nations web site in all official languages

1. In order to ensure the continued development, maintenance and enrichment of the web sites in the official languages, the following additional resource requirements, above and beyond the resources allocated for this activity in the programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003, would need to be considered by the General Assembly:

(a) The funding for the feasibility study proposed in paragraph 20 of document A/AC.198/2000/7, amounting to $100,000;

(b) Eight new Professional posts and six General Service posts for the Information Technology Section in the Department of Public Information, as outlined below.

2. These requirements have been recosted following the conversion of three positions funded from general temporary assistance into established posts for the maintenance of sites in official languages and the redeployment of other posts from within the Department.

3. The following resource requirements pertain only to the requirements of the Department of Public Information with regard to the management, maintenance and enrichment of United Nations web sites. They do not include the infrastructure support requirements of the Information Technology Services Division of the Department of Management, or requirements relating to the provision of content in other languages.

Component	*Posts required*	*Cost for 2002-2003 (United States dollars)*
Overall development	Web site applications specialist (P-3)	116 200
	Web site design specialist (P-3)	116 200
	Web site technical assistant (G-5/6)	79 300
Language units		
(six units)	6 web site editors/coordinators (P-4)	838 200
	5 web site assistants (G-5/6)	396 500
Total cost of posts		**1 546 400**

Total Professional posts required: 8
Total General Service posts required: 6